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### Circus WOW, Women of Wollongong's community circus: the politics of the site-specific

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**Circus WOW, Women of Wollongong's Community**

**Circus: The politics of the site-specific**

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## **Circus WOW, Women of Wollongong's Community Circus: The politics of the site-specific**

Janys Hayes, University of Wollongong

### **Abstract**

Circus WOW's advertising motif is the phrase, 'Ordinary women doing extraordinary things'. Created by Penny Lowther in 2001, Circus WOW appeared nearly a decade after Australia's more renowned women's circuses, such as the Women's Circus and the Performing Older Women's Circus in Melbourne and Vulcana in Brisbane. The late formation of Circus WOW in Wollongong coincided with the re-evaluation of the city's industrial role in Australia's economy. This paper argues that the success of Circus WOW reflects a reappraisal of place by audiences in a rapidly developing city.

The site-specific and festival work of Circus WOW provides the principal means through which the company is recognised by the general public of Wollongong. The presence of site-specific performance events can be used to effect 'place-making'. Circus WOW's female performers through interactive relationships with Wollongong environments have realigned perspectives of culturally dormant sites. This paper explores three site-specific Circus WOW productions, to investigate the interaction of this women's circus troupe with concepts of urban development in Wollongong spaces.

Now in its seventh year, Circus WOW's new director, Cheryle Moore, also director of Frumpus, a Sydney based all-women contemporary theatre company, seeks to strengthen the empowering role of Circus WOW in the cultural identity formation in the city of Wollongong. The enactment of differing possibilities for urban female subjects in a small city opens new spaces of contestation of identity for a wider public. This paper looks at the links between the visibility of outdoor and site-specific physical performance, regional politics and the concept of a 'missing voice' in the landscape. This perspective on the performative impact of an all female circus company complements the gender specific cultural niches occupied by women's circus companies established by previous research.

### **Introduction**

Circus WOW, Women of Wollongong's Community circus, is a community-based women's performance group which, until recently operated out of a disused industrial facility provided by the Wollongong City Council, in one of the more working class suburbs of Wollongong. Established in 2001 by Penny Lowther, a Churchill fellowship recipient, puppeteer and performer, Circus WOW is principally self-funded. The company provides a range of circo-arts workshops to women in the Illawarra community at large, as well as performing at events ranging from local festivals, specific women's celebrations, launches, university run programs, and the company performances by its members in local theatres.

The focus of this paper is to establish the performance work of Circus WOW in the context of the place in which it arose, Wollongong. Whereas new circus and women's circus in Australia has been accredited with challenging performative norms of gender representation, with political enactments and with a desire for physical and emotional developmental encounters,<sup>1</sup> this paper sets out to locate Circus WOW's

performative impact through issues of 'place'. Notably through Circus WOW's site-based performance work this paper views Circus WOW as impacting on a city in transition from its past industrial base, by providing a 'missing voice' in a landscape that is undergoing rapid urban development.

As Sydney Performance Studies theorist, Gay McAuley has noted:

Site-based performance engages deeply with its chosen site and as a result tends to be drawn into engagement with the social and political issues that seem inseparable from place: issues concerning ownership and occupation, individual and group identity, power, boundaries, rights of inclusion and exclusion, memory and history.<sup>2</sup>

As the visibility of Circus WOW is primarily located through its outdoor and site-based physical performances, this paper argues that the company through its location in a regional city provides new ways of encountering a contested urban landscape. In small cities, the emergence of a unique and visible performance company may come to represent more than the original aspirations of that company for the community in which it performs. As Cheryle Moore, the new director of Circus WOW states:

There's something particular about WOW. It's about skill and about a nonsense, a love of the area but also a great criticism of the area as well.<sup>3</sup>

### **Wollongong: A city at the crossroads**

Wollongong is a city of approximately 284,000 in population, the tenth largest city in Australia and the third largest in NSW.<sup>4</sup> Geographically Wollongong occupies a narrow strip of land wedged between its western escarpment, the Eastern seaboard, the Royal National Park to the north and the fields of Shellharbour to the south. In Wollongong there are 30 languages spoken with 22% of residents born overseas and 21% of residents speaking languages other than English in their homes.<sup>5</sup> Wollongong has no resident professional dance company. The city has a symphony orchestra and a professional theatre company, Merrigong, which acts mainly as a touring venue. Wollongong has a resident professional circus, Circus Monoxide. It has no professional small to medium sized theatre companies but it does have a thriving amateur theatrical scene.

Throughout the period of time from 2001 until the present, 2009, Wollongong has been rapidly undergoing change. The traditional workforce base in the Illawarra of unskilled and semi-skilled workers has shifted towards a population with more professional and managerial skills.<sup>6</sup> The original economy of the Illawarra was built around the mining industry with the Southern Hemisphere's largest integrated steelworks in the region, Bluescope Steel Ltd, situated in Port Kembla. It is Australia's largest producer of sheet steel and coil but it has transformed in the decades leading up to the present from a labour intensive employer of migrant workers to a highly mechanised industry, requiring tertiary-trained employees. The

University of Wollongong is now the largest employer in the Illawarra, with tourism and the service industry also contributing to Wollongong's economy.

As this transformation progresses, the Wollongong City Council has taken an active role in structuring a Cultural Plan for the city. To some extent Wollongong City Council modelled this plan on the developments in Newcastle, a similar historically steel production based city. There, with the closure of the steelworks in 1999, the local council initiated a series of cultural programs to stimulate not only tourism in the area but also the 'reactivation'<sup>7</sup> of former industrial sites as possible sites for urban renewal, through cultural activities. Amanda Buckland, employed through Cultural Services of the Wollongong City Council as the Coordinator of Cultural Development from 2001 until 2005, was one of the principal designers of the Wollongong City Council's Cultural Plan. In a 2001 paper by Buckland, given at the Regional Arts New South Wales Forum entitled 'Featured Sites-Cultural Industries and City Revitalisation',<sup>8</sup> she lists the cultural initiatives taken by the Wollongong City Council in a five-year strategy from 1998 through until 2003. Many of the stated initiatives are about building and reshaping Wollongong city's image, as well as building new cultural infrastructures and developing cultural industries. Two less broad-based strategies listed are firstly the development of a new citywide cultural festival, which became the Viva la Gong arts festival and perhaps more surprisingly the strategy of developing circus in Wollongong. Circus Monoxide, plus a youth circus and Circus WOW are listed as being vital in the growth of audiences, appealing to the youth of the region.

### **Wollongong: A Circus City**

In the past there has been a clear gap, in Wollongong, between the theatrically literate and those excluded from theatre due to language barriers. The Wollongong City Council initiatives, over the period of seven years, from the first Wollongong City Council run Viva la Gong arts festival in 2001 until the most recent in 2008, promoted circus events. Circus Monoxide and Circus WOW, as well as Half High, the children's circus associated with Circus Monoxide, have filled the popular entertainment niches at the Viva la Gong Festival, providing physical and image based performances that are able to appeal to a more general public. In a regional city, with its moderate sized population, this emergence of contemporary circus has stamped Wollongong as a circus city. In December 2006, the Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Association (ACAPTA) held its national conference in Wollongong, 'Fabulous Risk'<sup>9</sup> supported by the University of Wollongong. Wollongong, through its local Council initiatives had gained a new national recognition as supporting contemporary circus.

### **Women's' Circus**

Circus WOW's formation came late in the series of Australian women's circuses arising from the women's movements in major capital cities. Donna Jackson created the Women's Circus, probably the most recognised of women's circuses in Australia, in Melbourne in 1991. Jackson was the then Theatre Co-ordinator at the Footscray Community Arts Centre. Although open to any interested women, it was initially set up by inviting membership from women who had been survivors of sexual assault. The Women's Circus mission is to create a space 'where women can work in

a non-competitive environment to reaffirm control over their bodies, build self-esteem and establish their own personal goals for development.<sup>10</sup> The early performance work of the Women's Circus reflects this mission. In November 1991 the Women's Circus presented its first show, which took as its theme women in institutions and which questioned the stereotype of 'the bad woman'.<sup>11</sup> In 1995 the Performing Older Women's Circus in Melbourne began as an offshoot from the Women's Circus. The aim in this move was and is to facilitate a safe and supportive environment where women over forty can participate in physical activity. POW also aims to counter ageist attitudes towards women and to foster feminist perspectives and lesbian visibility.<sup>12</sup> POW's first show arose out of the Maribyrnong Falls Prevention Project and addressed the message of moving safely. It was the same year, 1995, that Vulcana in Brisbane was formed. The emphasis in Vulcana's mission statement,<sup>13</sup> whilst speaking of women and a non-competitive environment where physical skills can be developed, also emphasises collaborating with diverse communities, the notion of community cultural development and the aim to produce pathways for professional creative endeavours. Circus Wow also has aims 'to affirm women's lives' but adds the specificity of place, 'in the Illawarra'.<sup>14</sup> In the seven years of Circus WOW performance work not one of their productions has taken an overtly feminist issue as the primary basis for the Circus WOW work.

Penny Lowther in her address to the Fabulous Risk Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Association (ACAPTA) conference emphasised the community role of Circus WOW. It is notable that the membership of Circus Wow is often drawn from that population of Wollongong who have moved from Sydney. Lowther spoke at the ACAPTA conference of seeking a creative community through alternative community performance. The formation of Circus WOW with support through the Wollongong City Council to identify the city with a new, youth-orientated, culturally active audience, as well as the interest in Circus WOW of taking an active role in community development, places Circus WOW in a differing position to the earlier formations of women's circuses. For although Circus WOW operates for women and deliberately structures decision making processes so that consensus and collaboration are the political means of operating the company, the force of Circus WOW's directions have been as much shaped through being 'bodily in-place'<sup>15</sup> in a particular environment. Phenomenologist, Edward Casey, in using this term pursues an analysis of the experiential and often unconscious dimensions of the lived body's engagement with place. This bodily placement has been Circus WOW's determining factor for its support in the first place and for its continuation as an entity separate from the professional touring circus company, Circus Monoxide. Circus WOW, now in its seventh year and with a new artistic director, Cheryle Moore, a member of the Sydney all women's performance troupe Frumpus, renews its commitment to its place of origin. As Moore indicates, 'It's about a relationship. It's about WOW being from here. The women are from here and their work definitely does reflect the community'.<sup>16</sup>

The difference between Circus Monoxide and Circus WOW is marked by Circus WOW being an organization run by and for women only, and by Circus WOW's visibility in its community and outdoor performance work. Whilst Circus Monoxide has been described as being 'heavily influenced by the early Circus Oz',<sup>17</sup> and has in the past mixed an often political message with up-tempo antics performed from its touring painted bus, Circus WOW has a more eclectic approach to its

performed work, which stems from the individuals involved at any one time in the Wollongong company. Circus WOW members are local Illawarra citizens, whilst Circus Monoxide artists are drawn from the national circo-arts community. From Circus WOW's initial major performance in September 2002, *What's Her Story*,<sup>18</sup> shown at the Illawarra Performing Arts Centre, the theme of a link with the environment emerged, in comedy and in spectacle, not as a chosen issue, but simply because of the ways in which WOW's members are immersed in the Illawarra's surroundings. *What's Her Story* set the Circus WOW company in, under and at the sea. From adagio acts costumed in aqua surrounded by an underwater setting, to clowning sequences about Wollongong's beaches, Wollongong's natural environment was a fundamental characteristic of the production. One of the sustaining comedy acts to emerge from *What's Her Story?* was *Scrubbers*, where a team of incompetent lifeguards with ironing boards instead of surfboards perform unlikely acts, over and under each other whilst on their boards. Since 2002, *Scrubbers* has been presented both in theatrical venues as well as in outdoors settings and remains in Circus WOW's performance repertoire, with new performers replacing those who leave. From the production of *What's Her Story?* Penny Lowther and Soraya del Castillo developed their clown act of Pam and Dee, which in 2003 became definitively portrayed in the film, *Pam and Dee beside the Sea*.<sup>19</sup> Pam and Dee became recognisable Wollongong figures appearing frequently at community events, whilst the film was shown at short film festivals in and around the region.

In the following section of this paper, three site-based performance works, which Circus WOW initiated or in which Circus WOW participated, will be examined in the light of concepts of 'place'. Michael Cohen, director of Live Sites in Newcastle, writes in *About Performance* of the power of site-based performances in 'place-making and place-faking'.<sup>20</sup> Cohen's research highlights the ways in which performances can realign spectators' imaginations about previously encountered places through immersing the audiences' bodies and senses in new performative experiences. Cohen's terms are used in this paper to analyse Circus WOW's involvement in the complex political and social issues surrounding 'place' that are a part of the Illawarra. The aims of these descriptions and documentations of outdoor performance work by Circus WOW are to argue that through the means of site-based performance Circus WOW has added differing perspectives, a 'missing voice', to the contested notions of urban development in Wollongong.

## Site-based performance

### *Flame*

Circus WOW's first public appearance was at the fire-spectacular finale of the first Viva la Gong Festival on 1 April 2001. The event took place on the banks of Fairy Creek at one of Wollongong city's most popular parks, Stewart Park, just north of the city centre. Already the Viva la Gong Festival had excited a new response from Wollongong citizens and the finale, *Flame*<sup>21</sup> attracted an estimate of over 1,500 people. The naming of the new festival carried with it a larrikin ebullience, whilst Amanda Buckland its director stated that the name:

Honours the working roots and struggle of the people,  
[It is] a call to solidarity.<sup>22</sup>

*Flame* also had an unstated yet ironic meaning. The recently burnt down Lagoon restaurant, on the banks of Fairy Creek, was owned by the then Mayor of Wollongong, George Harrison. At that time Harrison was embroiled in a legal wrangle threatening to bankrupt him. As many residents understood, if declared bankrupt Harrison could no longer remain Mayor of the city. In the midst of this bankruptcy case his very popular restaurant strangely burnt down. Nobody was charged and Harrison remained mayor until bankruptcy did indeed force him from office. *Flame* was a pertinent sign to a more sophisticated readership at the Viva La Gong Festival, that times had changed in Wollongong and that Wollongong artists could reflect openly on political matters, which had usually been swept under the local government's carpet.

*Flame* was a community arts event, organised by a committee of seven local artists with the author as the director. It involved twenty community groups and over 100 participants. *Flame* began with an indigenous smoking ceremony. Then a Guardian of The Flame emerged from Fairy Creek to witness a pageant-like progression of giant puppets parading on the far sandbar across the creek. Each of these puppets symbolised the history of the different working cultures of the Illawarra and were complemented by diverse community groups performing songs and dances on the nearby shore. Finally Circus WOW in large numbers fire-twirled on the shore and wading across the creek passed the flame from performer to performer, until it ignited a huge flammable edifice on the sandbar, a phoenix with a heart of steel, indicating the resilience to economic change of Wollongong's community. As the phoenix burned and Circus WOW twirled their alight batons above the waters of Fairy Creek, a performer stood on a platform in the burning 15 metre high phoenix and gonged the steel plate shouting, "Viva la Gong".

Gay McAuley uses three categories of site-based performance to differentiate between what she understands as site-specific performance and other performances set in particular landscapes.<sup>23</sup> In this categorisation *Flame* may be defined as a site-specific work. McAuley recognises such performative events as arising out of the site itself, responding to the history and politics of the site and as being not transferable to any other performance site. Fairy Creek is situated in a well-recognised recreation park, however the creek itself is polluted and surrounded by signs that warn that it is unsafe to enter its waters. Circus WOW's contribution to *Flame* was essential and held the transformative qualities that Cohen identifies when speaking of the contestation between the site and the theatrical, the 'host and the ghost'.<sup>24</sup> In wading across Fairy Creek, some 100 metres wide, Circus WOW transformed the water into something other than a polluted stream seen at the edges of Stewart Park. Instead, alive with fiery reflections it became the pathway to a new Wollongong future, the presence of the Circus WOW performers defying or perhaps challenging a previous viewing of the creek's dangerousness as well as its proximity to political muddiness. Cohen suggests that the site-specific event affects the public viewing of the place even after the performance has ended, leaving 'a trace-like presence'.<sup>25</sup> Fairy Creek had gained a new welcoming and open status with Circus WOW's fire twirling a lasting transformative image.



### *Beneath My Feet*

*Beneath My Feet*<sup>26</sup> was another Viva la Gong Festival outdoor performance over three evenings, this time for the 2004 Festival. Initiated by Circus WOW, the project also involved artistic input from a composer, a video artist, a technical production company, a lighting designer and a stilt trainer. Created by Soraya de Castillo, one of the founding members of Circus WOW, *Beneath My Feet* attracted funding from the New South Wales Ministry for the Arts Theatre Program as well as the Wollongong City Council. The performance, which involved fifteen Circus WOW performers in stilt walking, acrobatics and adagio took place next to Wollongong's lighthouse, an iconic landmark at the city's harbour. The audiences were roped within a set perimeter of the performance area on the lighthouse promontory. The promontory flanks on one side the Wollongong Basin, a major tourist area for the region, whilst on the other side of the promontory a windswept South Beach stretches down to the overshadowing industrial complex of the Bluescope steelworks and industrial suburb of Port Kembla.

A large screen dominated one edge of the performance area. Clothed in white, Circus WOW performers emerged from behind rocks and fauna to perform an adagio section of the piece known as *Landforms*, flanked by oversized geometrical and abstract projections of colour. Although not stated, the work addressed the conflict between the protection of the natural environment in Wollongong and the rapid development of swathes of local land for urban housing. The theme became more apparent as two sets of stilt walkers faced-off against each other across the space. The adversarial nature of this section of choreography, together with the height of the performers, backed by the projections, produced a domination of the site, which was both dynamic and impressive. Circus WOW estimates that over 1,500 viewers were attracted to the performances over the three evenings.

The adagio section of *Beneath My Feet*, *Landforms* has had its own life separate from its initial location and has been re-presented at indoor circus, cabaret events and the Tasmanian Circus Festival. *Beneath My Feet* can be seen then as belonging to McAuley's first category of site-based performance, where certain physical features and aesthetic qualities are sought for the locating of a piece of work already in development.<sup>27</sup> *Beneath My Feet* was rehearsed separately from the lighthouse site; Circus WOW has kept a substantial portion of the original show in repertoire for performances in other locations. Cohen's notion of 'place-faking'<sup>28</sup> however still holds. For the three evenings in the Viva la Gong Festival the lighthouse promontory was transformed from its usual after dark solitariness into a thronging mass of forms. Used most often on weekends for bridal party photographs or for strolls by young families, the neatly mowed lawns, the rocks and gardens became alive for just a short while with seemingly alien life forms. In this Circus WOW site-based performance a glimpse of a well-known landmark was reinvented as a subversive environment. Whilst the genre of contemporary circus may have been recognisable for many of the audience, the differing elements of the production counterbalanced this with the social context of the performance. The interaction between the natural landscape and performers, the intermingling of physical theatre with circus skills, the sheer numbers of women performing together and the multi-media presence created a differing emphasis than merely circus. A neat categorisation

of the production became less possible and the over-riding questioning of the conventions of place became the attraction for Wollongong audiences.

### *A Grande and Curious Façade*

A third example of Circus WOW's site-based work, and one that again was non transferable, arising specifically from its particular place, illustrates further the intermingling of the troupe's work with social issues of contestation of the community values bestowed on 'place'. In 2006 and then again in 2007, Heidi Hillier one of the initial members of Circus WOW directed a team of WOW performers to stage a set of circus presentations in a small barber's shop in the main street of Thirroul, often described as one of Wollongong's 'northern coastal villages'.<sup>29</sup> Whilst street and outdoor performances are standard fare for the many festivals occurring annually throughout the Illawarra, shopfront performances are rare. The Circus WOW performances in Larry Dixon's barber's shop window at the beginning of April in both 2006 and 2007 attracted crowds that spilled from the pavements directly outside the small shop and across Lawrence Hardgrave Drive. Under the title of *The Barber's Shop*<sup>30</sup> in the 2006 Thirroul Seaside Festival, Circus WOW's free installation event immediately set itself apart from the typical tourist-centred events at the Thirroul Seaside Festival. An annual bustling seaside fair, the Thirroul Seaside Festival consists mainly of commercial rides, small market stalls and an outdoor platform for presentations by local dance schools and high school bands. A lantern parade by tiny tots and a seaside sculpture walk offer further community involvement. Circus WOW advertised *The Barber's Shop* as 'an eerie sideshow',<sup>31</sup> appealing to an alternative audience. The placement of the performance was particular, as the tiny barber's shopfront along with similar others was under threat of demolition with a plan to smarten up the Thirroul main street with more boutique style shops and a three storey high shopping plaza. In a blog from the 2006 Thirroul Seaside Festival Jacqui Coyle notes:

The current building fever has not escaped Thirroul. The property boom means half-million-plus prices. Disputes between residents and the Wollongong Council - about building heights, about the use of nearby wetlands for development, about the difficulties of living in the midst of yet more immense change in the area - have resulted in a new development plan hailed for its high community input. But change is not new. Tourism has always impacted on the Illawarra.<sup>32</sup>

Circus WOW through its oblique appeal to the past, with a barber-shop presentation, was attracting an audience dealing with the pressing demands of urban development.

The audience watched as Circus WOW members took their place in an old fashioned barber's seat positioned centrally in the window space. The lack of performance area restricted the acts to mainly those involving object manipulations, most often with a comic bent. Slapstick, grotesquery and physical skill enlivened a usually unnoticed corner of Thirroul's sidewalk. In 2007 Circus WOW took their message further. *A Grande and Curious Façade*<sup>33</sup> advertised as part of the 2007

Thirroul Seaside Festival's programme and performed in the same small barber's shop window, had a definite air of the freak show about it. It was a fringe event with a sensual and implied sexual undertone, advertising both a 'Tattooed Lady' as one of the acts and 'The Dancing Divas' and 'Performing Wombats' as others.<sup>34</sup> Circus WOW's radical addition to the seaside festival's events reminded audiences of the contested state of Thirroul's future development. If small enterprises in the sleepy setting were being sold, with a major shopping centre development and Gloria Jeans and Subway franchises moving in rapidly, where then was the place for the sensual, or the animal aspects that Circus WOW aligned with Thirroul's nature-surrounded past. Again, Circus WOW's site-based performance was questioning the kind of place that in this instance the suburb of Thirroul in the Illawarra could be for audiences and querying the necessity of the automatic future vision of rapid development.

### **The 'missing voice' in the landscape**

Educationalists Hocking, Haskell and Linds speak of 'the space of the possible'<sup>35</sup> emerging from interrelationships, where lived experiences contribute to new and complex understandings. In small cities the emergence of original and radical performance groups can form the basis for an effect on the population that is larger than the sum of the performance company's parts. Although the *raison d'être* of Circus WOW's work has been its gender-specific basis, this paper suggests through the examples of the three site-specific events offered, that other values and beliefs are being enacted as well as the companies support for women. A multifaceted web of understandings about identity and place is being performed for Wollongong audiences by Circus WOW's site-based performances.

Mills and Brown define 'community theatre' as 'participatory theatre of local relevance that develops local culture and helps achieve local aspirations'.<sup>36</sup> Whilst Circus WOW's aspirations rest on providing 'thought provoking circus and physical theatre that energetically affirms women's lives in the Illawarra'<sup>37</sup> by providing a space for the empowerment of groups of women who may not otherwise be heard, Circus WOW opens the possibility that their objectives coincide with other social change issues that are oppressed by mainstream cultures. In speaking about Circus WOW's site-based performance work Cheryle Moore has indicated that:

There is definitely scope for WOW to create another show about the space, about the land, about Wollongong, because it's so important, the landscape at the moment.<sup>38</sup>

Circus WOW presents only female bodies to audiences. Like all women's circus, it also subverts the genre of contemporary circus, as the performing bodies have not been shaped through the acceptability of professional circus standards. It is a circus of developing skills rather than professional skills. Circus WOW is a circus of many-shaped and many-aged bodies rather than athletic and youthful bodies. It is a circus that welcomes a conflation with queer theatre.<sup>39</sup> It is a circus of, using Mary Lane's term, 'a postmodernism of resistance',<sup>40</sup> where an emancipatory practice undermines certainties of that practice. It is by these means that this paper argues that Circus WOW has been able to become a voice of difference, a missing voice in the environment. Brown and Crittenden<sup>41</sup> also use this notion of missing or hidden voices in their evaluation of the role of community theatre in environmental activism. Listing

six links between community theatre and radical environmentalism they state that ‘the discourse of community theatre is about cultural rights, empowerment and the emancipation of hidden voices’<sup>42</sup> and indicate that performative actions of this nature have the ability to develop new languages for renegotiating environmental/human relationships. Although Circus WOW may not regard the company as having this kind of power, the network of community support surrounding the company may still invest these kinds of projections on the company, through processes of being bodily-with, or bodily identified with the performers.

### **An ongoing ‘placement’**

In January of this year Circus WOW was shocked by the closure of the only circus training space in the Illawarra. Despite Wollongong City Council’s expressed desire to support circus in the Illawarra, the need to develop the former industrial site was regarded as a greater priority. Rallying support from the local community new training and office premises were located and a lobby group established to ensure a sustainable future for the company.<sup>43</sup> Further support has been recognised as necessary by the Wollongong City Council’s Cultural Services.

In an example of the margin of the performance community influencing the language of the centre or centralised authority, Wollongong City Council has been attracted to images of Circus WOW’s performances, using these to promote the latest Viva La Gong Festivals<sup>44</sup> and the Wollongong City Council’s published Cultural Plan.<sup>45</sup> Images of Circus WOW’s performers represent the city of Wollongong as a place where visually exciting things happen and as a city that is culturally alive, aligning with Wollongong’s relatively recent branding as ‘Wollongong – City of Innovation’.<sup>46</sup> A full circle of representation has thus been enacted, where an alternative voice is performed via a decentralised or loosely created set of individuals, which then provides new ways of viewing the interaction between citizens of the small city and their landscape, which then becomes legitimised through the mainstream culture.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Textualities and Sexualities of Bodies in Motion: An Interview with Gail Kelly’ (by Shane Rowlands), *Australasian Drama Studies* 31 (1997): 92. ; Peta Tait, ‘Performing Sexed Bodies in Physical Theatre’ in Veronica Kelly, ed., *Our Australian Theatre in the Nineties* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998) 213. ; Reg Bolton, ‘Circus as Education’ *Australasian Drama Studies* 35 (1999): 9.

<sup>2</sup> Gay McAuley, ‘Introduction’ *About Performance: Local Acts: Site-Specific Performance Practice* 7 (2007): 7.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Cheryle Moore, 25 March 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics drawn from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2009).  
<http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au> Accessed 20 May 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Iris Research*, (2008). [www.iris.org.au/index.pl?page=221](http://www.iris.org.au/index.pl?page=221) Accessed 20 May 2009.

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<sup>7</sup> I take this term from the cultural program run by Newcastle City Council termed, 'Place Activation'. See Michael Cohen, 'Tracing New Absence: Events for Place-Making and Place-Faking', *About Performance* 7 (2007): 183.

<sup>8</sup> Amanda Buckland, 'Featured Sites – Cultural Industries and City Revitalisation' (Sydney, Regional Arts NSW Forum, 2001). [www.regionalartsnsw.com.au/docs/s-conf/amanda\\_buckland.pdf](http://www.regionalartsnsw.com.au/docs/s-conf/amanda_buckland.pdf) Accessed 13 July 2008.

<sup>9</sup> 'Fabulous Risk: Danger and Performance in Circus and Sideshow' (Wollongong, Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Association National Conference, University of Wollongong, 1-3 Dec. 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Trish Fitzsimons, 'Writing in the Margins: The Theatrical Voices of Women' *Overland* 136 (1994): 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> See POW Circus [home.vicnet.net.au/~powcirc/about.htm](http://home.vicnet.net.au/~powcirc/about.htm) Accessed 14 July 2008.

<sup>13</sup> See Vulcana Circus [www.vulcana.org.au/more-mission.htm](http://www.vulcana.org.au/more-mission.htm) Accessed 14 July 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Circus WOW [www.circuswow.org.au/wow\\_main.html](http://www.circuswow.org.au/wow_main.html) Accessed 14 July 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) 47.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Cheryle Moore, 25 March 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Lyn Everett, 'Thrills and Spills: The Precarious Life of Circus Monoxide' *Australasian Drama Studies*, 35 (1999): 52.

<sup>18</sup> *What's Her Story?*, produced by Circus WOW, directed by Penny Lowther, Bruce Gordon Theatre, Illawarra Performing Arts Centre, Wollongong (2-23 Sept. 2002).

<sup>19</sup> *Pam and Dee beside the Sea* was directed by Sarah Moss for Smashing House Productions in 2003. In it the two clowns Pam and Dee go to the Wollongong beach for a day. Dee falls asleep and dreams of the possible futures for Wollongong.

<sup>20</sup> Cohen 183.

<sup>21</sup> *Flame*, Viva la Gong Festival, director Janys Hayes, (Wollongong: 1 April, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Buckland 5.

<sup>23</sup> McAuley 9.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen 189.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Beneath My Feet*, by Circus WOW, initiated by Soraya del Castillo, directed by Wendy Regan, musical composition by Marianthe Loucataris, video artist Sarah Moss, (Viva La Gong Festival, Wollongong: 28-30 Oct. 2004).

<sup>27</sup> McAuley 8.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen 183.

<sup>29</sup> Tourism Wollongong <http://tourismwollongong.com.au/nw.asp> Accessed 18 Dec. 2008.

<sup>30</sup> *The Barber's Shop*, by Circus WOW, directed by Heidi Hillier (Thirroul Seaside Festival, Thirroul, NSW: 1 April, 2006.)

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.thirroulfestival.com/circuswow.html> Accessed 18 December 2008.

<sup>32</sup> [http://www.wordygurdy.com.au/travel/pdf\\_travel/DoingThatThirroulThing.pdf](http://www.wordygurdy.com.au/travel/pdf_travel/DoingThatThirroulThing.pdf) Accessed 18 December 2008.

<sup>33</sup> *A Grande and Curious Façade*, by Circus WOW, directed by Heidi Hillier (Thirroul Seaside Festival, Thirroul, NSW: 31 March 2007).

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.thirroulfestival.com/circuswow.html> Accessed 18 December 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Brent Hocking, Johnna Haskell and Warren Linds, *Unfolding Bodymind: Exploring Possibility Through Education* (Brandon, Vermont: Foundation for Educational Renewal, 2001) 6.

<sup>36</sup> Deborah Mills and Paul Brown, *Wellbeing: Confirming the Connections Between Community Cultural Development and Health, Ecologically Sustainable Development, Public Housing and Place, Rural Revitalisation, Community Strengthening, Active Citizenship, Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity* (Sydney: Australia Council for the Arts, 2004) 43.

<sup>37</sup> Circus WOW [www.circuswow.org.au/wow\\_main.html](http://www.circuswow.org.au/wow_main.html) Accessed 27 January 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Cheryle Moore, 25 March 2009.

<sup>39</sup> See Gail Kelly's interview regarding the conflation of physical theatre with queer theatre in relation to the work of Club Swing and The Party Line in Shane Rowlands, 'Textualities and Sexualities of Bodies in Motion: An Interview with Gail Kelly', *Australasian Drama Studies*, 31 (October 1997): 98-9.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Lane, 'Community Development and a Postmodernism of Resistance', in Bob Pease and Jan Fook, eds., *Transforming Social Work Practice: Postmodern Critical Perspectives* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1999) 135-49.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Brown and Xanthe-Rose Crittenden, 'Nature Moves Centre Stage: Eco-centrism in Community Theatre', *About Performance: Local Acts: Site-Specific Performance Practice* 7 (2007): 99-115.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid* 101.

<sup>43</sup> Circus WOW's recent fortunes were plotted in a series of articles in *The Wollongong and Northern Leader*. 'Circus loses WOW factor to eviction' *The Wollongong and Northern Leader* (Wollongong, NSW: Southern Independent Publishers, 5 February 2009); 'Circus cause could take a tumble' *The Wollongong and Northern Leader* (Wollongong, NSW: Southern Independent Publishers, 5 February 2009); 'WOW! Circus finds a new home' *The Wollongong and Northern Leader* (Wollongong, NSW: Southern Independent Publishers, 26 February 2009).

<sup>44</sup> At the most recent Viva La Gong Festival launch an image of Cheryl Moore from Circus WOW dominated the local media coverage. Jodie Minus, 'Viva La Gong acts flying high' *Mercury* (Wollongong, NSW: Fairfax Press, 17 September 2008).

<sup>45</sup> *Wollongong City Council Cultural Plan 2006-2011* (Wollongong: Wollongong City Council, 2006).

<sup>46</sup> The Wollongong City Council website heading illustrates the logo.

<http://www.wollongong.nsw.gov.au/>